



A Call for New Benchmarks at Saudi Language and Translation Schools

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Bio Data:

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Abstract

Since the year 2000, Saudi universities have cancelled all admission tests and have adopted an open admission policy that depends on high school GPA only. Many high school graduates in Saudi Arabia, especially females, show a great interest in joining colleges of languages and translation and admission to those colleges has been highly competitive. Despite the fact that the lowest GPA for high school graduates admitted to the College of Languages & Translation (COLT) in Fall 2007 was 98.3%, results of the fall 2007 final exams were exceptionally shocking with only 21.8% passing the reading course. The attrition rate in Fall 2003 was 20% and it went up to 30% in Spring 2004. Few students drop each week and many re-register in the following semester adding up to the total number of enrollees. This status quo shows a need for adopting new admission benchmarks at Saudi language and translation schools. Recommendations for improving the current status are given.

1. Introduction

In almost all countries, college admission has become competitive. Students wishing to join English, translation or linguistics departments in non-English-speaking countries, or those wishing to join other majors in English-speaking countries or English-medium universities must meet the English-language requirements for college admission. English language requirements vary from country to country and from school to school within the same country. These include one of the following:

- (i) *At least two years of foreign language classes in high school.* For example, Carleton, Georgia Tech, MIT, UCLA, University of Illinois and University of Michigan require at least two years of foreign language classes in high school, Stanford University requires 3 years, and Harvard requires 4 years.

- (ii) *Proof of English language proficiency* in any of the following ways: Six credits of post-secondary English, English 12 and two years of high school in Canada, Advanced Placement English Language/Composition or English Literature/Composition, International Baccalaureate English Language, Language Proficiency Index Level 4, four years of full-time study in English in Canada at a high school or post-secondary institution.
- (iii) *A satisfactory standard in a university-approved English test* such as IELTS (International English Language Testing Service), TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), University of Cambridge Local Examination Syndicate, CAE (Certificate in Advanced English), ESOL (Pitman English for Speakers of Other Languages), GCSE or O-Level, Edexcel (London Test of English), UCLES International (GCSE English as a Second Language), ELA (English Language Assessment Test), CAEL (Canadian Academic English Language Assessment Test). This procedure has been used in the UK, Australia and New Zealand.
- (iv) *Competency-based admissions policies and procedures.* These criteria were used by the California's Transitions project, the University of Wisconsin's Competency-Based Admissions System, Oregon's Proficiency-Based Admissions Standards System and Washington's competency-based admissions plan (Pribbenow, Phelps, Briggs & Stern, 1999).
- (v) *The alignment of high school graduation requirements with college entry requirements.* For example, the Achieve Organization reviewed New Jersey's Core Curriculum Content Standards in language arts literacy (Cohen, Gandal & Slattery, 2004). *Achieve* (2005) also reviewed the degree of alignment between the courses students must take to earn a high school diploma and the courses required for admission to the University of Delaware and Delaware State University, as well as for placement into a degree program at Delaware Technical and Community College. To be prepared for postsecondary education and work, every high school student should take four years of grade-level English, with courses that include literature, writing, reasoning, logic and communication skills. The courses students take must reflect college- and work ready standards and must be part of a required college- and work-ready course of study.

Unlike the restricted college entry policies in the USA, Canada, UK, Australia, New Zealand and other countries, college entry to tertiary education in Saudi Arabia has been open to all high school graduates since the year 2000, when the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education mandated that all Saudi state universities adopt an open admission policy that depends on high school GPA only. Admission tests used before the year 2000 were cancelled with the exception of those for the Colleges of Medicine and Dentistry. Colleges of Engineering and Architecture use an aptitude test for their prospective students. In the year 2000, the total number of freshman students seeking

admission to higher education institutions was 70,000 as opposed to 20,631 in 1982. Saudi state universities were facing mounting pressure from parents and high school graduates themselves and there were many complaints in Saudi newspapers by those who could not get admission to college.

Since the year 2000, many Saudi high school graduates, especially females have shown a great interest in joining colleges of languages and translation (where students are trained to become English-Arabic and Arabic-English professional translators and interpreters). Admission to those colleges especially the College of Languages and Translation (COLT) at King Saud University (KSU) has been highly competitive. The number of admitted students to those colleges is continually increasing. For example, the total number of female freshman students increased from 84 students in Fall 2000 to 393 students in Spring 2005. In 4 years, female freshman students' enrollment figures have quadrupled. Since Fall 2003, each semester has been witnessing an increase of at least 50 students over the previous semester. High school graduates are admitted to COLT based on their high school GPA, regardless of their actual English proficiency level. No admission tests are given. Only students who transfer from other departments at KSU or other Saudi universities to COLT are given an English Admission Test. The percentage of transfer students who pass the admission test is between 10%-15%.

In the past 8 years, the open admission policy, that depends on the high school GPA only as an admission standard, has proved to be inadequate and some critical issues about English language education such as student success rates, the percentage of graduate and dropout rates, and allocation of resources and shortage of teaching staff, have emerged, which require a re-consideration of an English college entrance exam as a new measure for admission to COLT. The present study aims to establish the case for a college entrance examination at Saudi English departments in general and colleges of languages and translation in particular. It aims to show the need and/or give a rationale for adopting new benchmarks at Saudi English departments by examining the effects of current open admission policies to COLT on section enrolment, teaching load, program staffing, classroom instruction, and students' progress through the translation program.

Although Saudi English departments are open to all students graduating from high school, all students must demonstrate that they are ready for college-level academic work in English and for studying specialized literature, linguistics and translation

courses by passing a COLT's admission test once they enroll. Because the Saudi Ministry of Education does not explicitly define college English language readiness standards for high school students, the admission exams would function as the de facto entry-level standards for English departments and colleges of languages and translation at Saudi universities. Re-introducing a college entrance exam, as a benchmark for admission to Saudi English departments and colleges of languages and translation would enhance student preparation for college, would improve student performance in college, would result in greater student success, lower student dropout rates and increase the graduation rate, and would help decision and policy makers at the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education discern the consequences of the absence of such an entrance exam, and make sure admissions decisions match institutional goals for student characteristics.

2. Subjects

A random sample of 100 female students in semesters 1-10 at the College of Languages and Translation (COLT), King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia participated in the study. In addition, participants included a sample of 20 instructors who have taught English language courses to freshman students (Level I students) at COLT. Ten percent of the instructor sample have a Ph.D. degree, 20% have an M.A. degree and 70% have a B.A degree. Finally, the department head and two program coordinators at the Department of European Languages and Translation at COLT were also interviewed. The department head and coordinators have worked at COLT for 20 years.

3. Instruments

- (a) *Students' questionnaires and Interviews*: The student questionnaire consisted of open-ended questions such as: (i) Do you think prospective freshman students should take an admission test before being admitted to COLT? (ii) What are the advantages/disadvantages of admitting students to COLT without an admission test? (iii) What are the advantages and disadvantages of limiting admission to COLT to students who pass the Admission Test? (iv) Describe the English textbooks you had in high school compared to those of COLT; (v) Describe the English exams you had in high school compared to those of COLT?
- (b) *Instructors' interview-questionnaire*: It consisted of the same open-ended questions as the students' questionnaire, and it was administered to all of the instructors, language course coordinators, and department head.

4. Data collection

- (a) *Student data*: Female freshman student enrollment statistics at COLT, freshman students' high school GPA, the number of sections, section enrollment, number of withdrawn students, number of repeating students, the listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary building course final exam scores for Fall 2007, and grammar final exam scores for six semesters were obtained.
- (b) *Course data*: The number of sections and total number of credit hours offered at each of the ten college levels were obtained.
- (c) *Students' questionnaires*: A questionnaire was e-mailed to the 100 students and 80% were returned.
- (d) *Instructor, coordinator and department head interviews*: Instructors, language course coordinators, and department head were individually interviewed and responses of each subject were recorded on her interview-questionnaire form.

5. Data analysis

To describe the annual increase in female freshman student enrollment at COLT, the percentage of withdrawn students, the percentage of repeating students and frequencies of section enrollment were computed. To find out the effect of open admission policies on academic achievement, the percentage of passing students in the grammar course was calculated for six semesters (as an example). To find out the effect of open admission policies on program staffing and on faculty teaching load, the total number of hours offered to all the sections of the ten college levels and the teaching load of all the female faculty was calculated in hours. Instructors, coordinators and department head's responses to the open-ended interview-questionnaire were sorted out and analyzed. Quantitative as well as qualitative analyses are reported below.

6. Results

All of the students, instructors, coordinators and department head (100%) surveyed indicated that high school students wishing to join COLT should pass an Admission Test. They gave several reasons for demanding such an admission test. These are summarized below.

6.1 Inadequacy of the high school GPA as a sole admission standard

All of the instructors, coordinators and department head (100%) reported that the

general English proficiency level of students graduating from high school is deteriorating. Most freshman enrollees are not qualified enough to make it through the COLT program. The current admission standards that depend on the high school GPA only are inadequate and insufficient and do not reflect the students' actual level in English. High school grades are generally inflated and high GPA's do not necessarily reflect a high proficiency level in English and a good aptitude for English and translation studies. Freshman class instructors complain of their students' poor English aptitude and their inability to make it through the listening, speaking, reading, writing and vocabulary building and grammar courses that students are required to take in their freshman year as a prerequisite to their training in translation.

All of the students (100%) surveyed indicated that at the high school level, one textbook is used to teach reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary building skills (4 hours per week). The high school English curriculum is easy and most high school students memorize questions and answers, grammar rules and compositions. High school midterm and final exams depend on rote memorization, as the same text and questions studied in the textbook and practiced in class are reproduced on those tests. By contrast, freshman students at COLT take 20 hours of English language course per week: listening (3 hours), speaking (4 hours), reading (4 hours), writing (4 hours), grammar (2 hours), vocabulary building (3 hours) courses. All of the students (100%) indicated that the midterm and final exams at COLT focus on application of rules and skills and unseen texts are used on listening and reading exams. About 90% of the subjects felt a big gap between high school and college English in terms of the amount of material covered, range and types of skills to be acquired, and midterm and final exam length and difficulty level.

6.2 Percentage of failing freshman students

Despite the fact that the lowest GPA for high school graduates admitted to COLT in Fall 2007 was 98.3%, results of the fall 2007 semester final exams were exceptionally shocking. Final exam results were alarming for students, instructors and administration. For example, 21.8% passed the reading course, and 45% passed the vocabulary-building course. In grammar, Table (1) shows that the pass rate has been declining: 66% passed in Fall 2000; 87% passed in Spring 2001; 43% passed in Fall 2003; 56% passed in Spring 2004; 30% passed in Fall 2004; and 35.8% passed in spring 2005.

Table 1: Student Enrollment, Withdrawals and Pass Rates in Freshman Grammar between Fall 2000 and Spring 2005

<i>Semester</i>	<i># sections</i>	<i>Students per section</i>	<i>Grand Total</i>	<i>Withdrawn Students</i>	<i>Took Final Exam</i>	<i>Passing Students</i>
Fall 2000 (Semester 1)	2	40-42	82	28%	59	66%
Spring 2001 (Semester 2)	2	37-40	77	11.7%	68	84%
Fall 2003 (Semester 3)	5	47-48-51-51-54	251	20%	200	42.5%
Spring 2004 (Semester 4)	5	57-65-66-67-70	325	30%	237	56%
Fall 2004 (Semester 5)	5	72-72-74-74-76	368	25%	275	29.8%
Spring 2005 (Semester 6)	6	39-65-68-73-74-74	393	27%	287	35.8%

Table 2: Percentages of Withdrawn Freshman Students in All Language Courses Offered at COLT in Fall 2007

Freshman Courses	% of Withdrawn Students
listening	19%
speaking	24%
reading	19%
writing	19%
grammar	21%
vocabulary	20%

Table 3: Percentages of Students Repeating the English Freshman Language Courses in Fall 2007

Freshman Courses	Total Enrollment	Number of Repeaters	% of Repeaters
listening	159	39	24.5%
speaking	126	6	4.8%
reading	192	72	37.5%
writing	232	112	48%
vocabulary	197	77	39%
grammar	198	78	39%

6.3 Percentage of withdrawn and repeating freshmen

The median percentage of students who take courses over is between 19% to 24% in the listening, speaking reading, writing, vocabulary building courses in the Fall 2007

(See Table 2), and was between 11.7% -30% in the grammar course (see Table 1), either because they fail or because they drop and re-register it in the following semester and 4.8% and 48% with a median of 38% in all freshman courses in Fall 2007 (See Tables 2 and 3), adding up to the total number of enrollees. This involves a waste of resources such as teacher and student time, budget, and lab and classroom facilities.

6.4 Struggling students in upper levels

All of the instructors, coordinators and department head indicated that students who barely pass and are pushed from one level to the next, get stuck when they reach semester 5, where they start to take content courses such as linguistics, semantics, stylistics and text linguistics. Some of those struggling students take the course between 3-5 times and cannot transfer to another college because of their inability to meet the transfer college standards. Thus some end up graduating two years after their classmates in the freshman semester who made it through the program.

6.5 Percentage of graduating seniors

The percentage of freshman students who are actually capable of reaching semester 10 and successfully completing the program is between 20% -25% of the number of enrollees in their freshman class. All of the instructors, coordinators and department head indicated that if the best 25% of high school graduates interested in joining COLT are selected based on their performance on an admission test, COLT will have 1-2 freshman sections rather than 4-5 sections. The number of students enrolled in each section would drop by 50%, thus the number of instructors needed to cover the freshman courses would drop by 50%-70%. Instructors would be teaching a homogeneous group of students with better English proficiency level. Instruction would be directed towards good and excellent students rather than paying more attention to poor and struggling students and less attention to good and excellent students when classes are large with many sections. The attrition rate would be below 5%, the percentage of passing students would increase to 95%-100%. The percentage of repeaters would be less than 5%. More seats would be available for better quality students. Between 50%-75% of the college budget and resources would be saved.

All of the instructors, coordinators and department head reported that students with a low proficiency level in English, i.e. those who do not pass the Admission Test, will

be directed to other majors where the medium of instruction is Arabic and in which they can do better. They added that this would save them time and effort and they will graduate in time rather than struggling at COLT and graduating one or more semesters later than their peers with a low GPA.

6.6 Large freshman course and section enrollment

Table (1) shows that with the absence of an Admission Test, there is an ongoing increase in the total number of enrolled students, number of sections and number of students per section in the grammar1 course. In Fall 2007, the total number of enrolled students, number of sections and number of students per section were as follows: The listening course had a total of 159 students with individual section sizes of 30, 30, 31, 33, 35; the speaking course had a total of 126 students with individual section sizes of 37, 37, 38, 39, 41; the reading had a total of 192 students with individual section sizes of 33, 39, 39, 41, 45; the vocabulary course had a total of 197 students with individual section sizes of 33, 39, 39, 41, 45; the writing course had a total of 232 students with individual section sizes of 41, 43, 44, 44, 51; the vocabulary course had a total of 136 students with individual section sizes of 23, 25, 28, 30, 30; the grammar course had a total of 198 students with individual section sizes of 33, 38, 42, 42, 43.

Table 4: Total Numbers of Sections and Teaching Hours Required for All the Sections at All the Levels in Four Semesters

Levels	Fall 2003		Spring 2004		Fall 2004		Spring 2005	
	<i>Sections</i>	<i>Hrs</i>	<i>Sections</i>	<i>hrs</i>	<i>Sections</i>	<i>Hrs</i>	<i>Sections</i>	<i>hrs</i>
One	5	100 (26.8%)	5	100 (27.7%)	5	100 (23%)	6	120 (26%)
Two	4	80 (21.5%)	4	80 (22%)	5	100 (23%)	5	100 (22%)
Three	3	42	3	42	4	56	4	56
Four	3	36	2	24	3	36	4	48
Five	2	34	2	34	3	51	3	51
Six	2	36	2	36	2	36	2	36
Seven	1	10	1	10	2	20	1	10
Eight	1	12	1	12	1	12	1	12
Nine	1	12	1	12	1	12	1	12
Ten	1	10	1	10	1	10	1	10
Total	23	372	22	360	27	433	28	455

6.7 Staffing burden

Table (4) shows that about 50% of the teaching hours are offered to Levels One and Two sections and requires teaching or instruction by half the faculty. With the increase in COLT student enrollment as a result of the open admission policies and lack of screening by an Admission test, there is a continual increase in the number of teaching hours to be covered.

6.8 Effects on classroom instruction

Open admission results in large class sizes, which in turn results in lack of small group activities and individualized instruction. There are also too many poor students, little time to check each student's work in class and class time is wasted on working with poor students, while good students are ignored.

7. Discussion and conclusion

The students, instructors, coordinators and department head surveyed in the present study feel that many Saudi high school graduates are not well prepared for postsecondary English language study despite the fact that the lowest GPA of students admitted to COLT was 98.3%. Findings of the present study are consistent with findings of a study by Olson (2006), who found that California State University(CSU) draws its students from the top third of the state's high school graduates and applicants have at least a B average in a college-preparatory curriculum; yet placement tests identified 47% of incoming freshmen in 2004 as needing remedial instruction in English. In another study, Ronco (1995) analyzed the risk factors associated with graduation, transfer, or withdrawal based on the cohort of 1,635 first- time-in-college students entering the university in fall 1987 and followed through spring 1994. Results showed that the risk of transfer to a two-year college was almost as high as the risk of dropout throughout the enrollment period. Provisionally admitted students and those with low GPAs were at greatest risk. Almost one-third of the cohort graduated and almost as many dropped out.

Findings of the present study revealed that high school GPA as a main criterion for admission to COLT is inadequate for predicting success in college, for reducing attrition rates and for limiting the size of enrolment and results in some problems. Costrell (1993) found that a lower admission standard reduces performance among

students exceeding the graduation standard by impairing their preparation for college work.

The students, instructors and department head surveyed in the present study also recommended that an admission test be given to all high school graduates wishing to join COLT. Use of an admission test is supported by the literature. Studies of first- year college GPA (ACT, 1998; Allen, Robbins, Casillas, & Oh, 2007) suggest that the combination of ACT (American College Testing, a standardized college admission test) composite score and high school GPA provides greater accuracy of admission decisions for most groups of students than using either measure alone. High school GPA and ACT scores were also found to be the best predictors of freshman academic performance and success (Noble & Sawyer, 2002; 2004); and Garton, Dyer & King, 2000). ACT scores and class ranking were important predictor variables for success in college (Mulvenon, Stegman, Thorn & Thomas, 1999).

Instructor, coordinators and department head surveyed in the present study stressed the need for introducing an admission test as a second admission requirement to COLT. The need for using an admission test to screen students before entering college was stressed by findings of a study by Rodriguez (1995) who reviewed 10 admission policies and practices in 10 states: California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Kentucky, New York, Oklahoma, Oregon, Texas, and Wisconsin. Rodriguez found that those universities needed to clearly communicate to high school students expectations for college-level work to foster greater collegiate retention and graduation. They needed to strengthen the quality of the high school curriculum, to reduce remediation in postsecondary education, to improve the levels of access and academic achievement of underrepresented students, to manage enrollment within constrained budgets and to align high school student outcomes and college expectations.

A review of the literature also showed that some universities that had similar problems with student admission reviewed their current policies and established new admission benchmarks which were proved to be effective. For example, in the late 1980's the Oklahoma state higher education system had a problem of lagging performance, as indicated by data showing poor performance compared to similar institutions, inadequate college preparation of college-bound students and college freshmen, and mismatches of students and colleges. The state adopted a comprehensive policy approach and specific policy steps to strengthen quality and

broaden access by enhancing student preparation for college and improving college student performance. Some current indicators show positive student outcomes. These included better student preparation for college (e.g., more high school students are taking the 13-unit core academic curriculum and freshmen are better prepared for college level work) and greater college student success (as indicated by lower student dropout rates and higher graduation rates). The California state legislature, through Senate Bill 664, requested examination of admission policies and attrition rates in California community college RN programs. Specifically, the authors ask whether admission policies affect attrition, what other program characteristics affect attrition, and whether these things affect first-time pass rates on the national nursing board exam. Based on their predictive models, on-time completion, delay, and attrition rates were better in programs that had fewer students (Brown & Niemi, 2007).

The instructors, coordinators and department head suggested that the COLT admission test should consist of the following subtests: An English Language Proficiency subtest, a Translation subtest, an Arabic Language Proficiency subtest, a General Knowledge subtest and a Computer and Internet Literacy subtest. The admission test should be first administered to a sample of high school graduates before it is implemented. Several parallel versions of the Admission Test must be constructed, tried out and used alternately to avoid disclosure of the test content. Those admitted to COLT must score 60% and above on the English Language Proficiency test, on the Arabic Language proficiency Test, on the Translation, on the Computer Literacy and on the General Knowledge Tests.

To implement the COLT admission test, a report on the current admission status, and consequences of the absence of admission test, together with statistics showing the percentage of students passing final exams, percentage of withdrawn students, percentage of struggling students, percentage of the freshman class graduating from COLT, freshman section enrollment, and total teaching hours required for covering semesters 1 and 2 classes must be presented to decision and policy makers at the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education. To take effect, the report must be processed through the department and college councils and Council of Deans. Screening students before admission to COLT will save the university money, students and teachers' time and effort.

Finally, faced with hundreds of incoming students with a very low proficiency level

in the English language and wishing to join colleges of languages and translation, educators at all levels must begin a sustained and serious dialog about the overall goals of the education system and the need for screening students before entering college. Pilot projects should be launched to try out new approaches to admission and ultimately to develop a set of model admission criteria. The Saudi Ministry of Education, Ministry of Higher Education and higher education institutions should try to increase public awareness and dialog by offering visible support to admission reform efforts. They must also launch an effort to provide high school seniors with an early signal of whether they have the English language skills necessary for colleges of languages and translation and/or English departments to provide guidance for those who do not.

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